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Your Ministry
Mark 1:14-22
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I'm never quite sure that we understand the full implications of what we just did. Perhaps I'm in error, but I sense that ordination Sunday is not one of the high points in the worship life of the people in the pew. Yet, in terms of what it means to be a Presbyterian Christian, there is probably no more significant event in the life of this congregation than the occasion of the laying on of hands, and the calling into specific service a group of laymen in the rite of ordination.

In this ritualistic act we have made a very important statement about God, the Church, discipleship to Jesus Christ, and ourselves. We have affirmed that Almighty God, - through his church - calls men to service, and that he joins them in the on-going process of accomplishing his ends in the human community. In the laying on of hands we have affirmed our solidarity with a community of men which extends 2,000 years into the past. We have said, in this act, that the church is the whole people of God, and not only or primarily the clergy. We have said something about the matter of following Jesus Christ as his disciples in the context of our own lives. Finally, by ordaining laymen, using the same ruberics that are employed to ordain clergymen, we have said something about the common ministry shared by everyman who calls himself a Christian.

We've said quite a lot this morning, but probably more important than what we've said is the time and situation in which we've said it. It is a crucial time for the church as an institution. We are at a pivotal point in the long history of Christianity. The whole church - from the Vatican to the smallest Protestant parish in the mid-west - is undergoing rapid and painful change. And if not change, at least severe anxiety from the knowledge that changes are happening even though we personally may not yet be participating in them.

At this important juncture in time no topic is more discussed, debated, argued and written about than the role of the laity. You are the contemporary ecclessiastical celebrities. The books coming off the church presses, and the books I have occasion to read, deal with your situation far more frequently, and articulately and urgently than my own. And when one of us becomes one of you; when a minister or priest or nun demits; the event is the object of far more interest and concern than when the reverse happens. In fact, if a clergyman wants to write a book that will sell, one of the first prerequisites seems to be a dramatic exit from his profession.

How came we here? How did you get to be such celebrities? How did the layman's role in the church come to be such an urgent concern in the year of our Lord 1971? It began, as all good stories do, a long, long time ago when Jesus Christ walked past several fisherman and enlisted their services in the cause by calling them to follow him. In the early, formative years of the Church there were no clergymen or laymen. The words for the community were the Greek "ecclesia" and "laos", meaning "a called out community" and "the whole people of God". The real meaning of laity, therefore, is the whole people, the whole body, a group of individuals who sense that they exist in a special relationship with each other, with God, and that sense that Jesus Christ has given them a job to do in the world in his name and for his sake. That is to say - the laity - the whole people together have a ministry to the world, in the world and for the world.

That is the philosophic background; but it is not a description of how things really are. For, one of the unfortunate tricks which occurred in the long history of the people of God is that the responsibility for ministry shifted from the whole people to a distinct group or class of people called the clergy. They became the ministers; all the rest became the laity, and the original concept was put reverently to rest.

By the time of the 15th and 16th centuries the situation had deteriorated

so badly that the clergy came perilously close to becoming the church. All power was theirs; and the word laity came to mean the unordained, the uninformed, the uniniated - which definition, unfortunately maintains today.

The Protestant Reformation changed all that - in a letter. "The priesthood of all believers" became the rallying cry of a whole new idea of the church - or rather a very old, New Testament idea. But, the spirit didn't change much. The humanity of the clergy became a little more evident: power was distributed a little bit: Protestants didn't and don't revere their pastors as much. But the reality of the situation, I would submit, didn't change at all. "Ministry" was something a specific group of men did. And all the rest could sit back, pay them for their work and cheer them on.

You are celebrities today because we've suddenly awakened to the fact that the vast majority of you never did buy the idea that the laity - the whole people of God - the whole church regardless of how we earn a living - has a ministry to perform.

Listen to how your church views the situation. These excerpts are from the Report of a Special Committee on the Laity, heard and adopted by the General Assembly of our denomination last year.

"Perhaps the largest group of all, and the most 'alienated', are those who have never recognized their membership as ministry. They participate occasionally in worship, and may call upon the minister for pastoral services, but they minister neither within the congregation nor in the wider community. A barrier of indifference separates them from the common fellowship."

And later in the report: "Ministry is response to God's loving acts. It is the activity in which Christians are engaged at all times, whether they are aware of it or not . . . . A few persons exercise ministry primarily in or through the church itself. More find the basic call to ministry outside the church in business, home or community, but all share responsibility to God for the use of His gifts. Because ministry has so frequently been understood only

in terms of institutional service to the church, many Christians are unaware of their obligation to engage in ministry through the ordinary activities of life. This is the real vocation of every Christian." [see pp 207-218, Minutes of the General Assembly, 1970, Part I, Journal]

It all began when Jesus saw several rough, unsophisticated, common fishermen at work, invited them to follow him, and they did. Perhaps we will be helped by looking at that particular event in a little more depth.

Immediately after the arrest of John the Baptist, Jesus came back to Galilea - "preaching" - Mark tells us. His message - unlike the gloomy predictions of the Baptist was "Good News" - "Gospel". Briefly it was 'Believe the exceptionally good news of a God of unfailing love. Believe that God is now doing a new thing among us. See the new kingdom which is now in the midst of us. Turn around and be a part of that kingdom."

Evidently the fishermen knew him. Notice that two were fishing, two were mending nets - the latter brothers in a family of some substance because their father Zebedee had hired help. Notice that the primary injunction in the call to ministry involves engaging other men. Notice, also, that the phrase "I will make you fishers of men" takes very seriously the personalities, skills, vocations of the men he called. He did not say, "follow me and I'll make you Bishops or theologians" - but "fishermen".

These men found it necessary to lay down their nets and walk away from jobs, family and security. Although one New Testament commentator suggest that that is a romanticised conclusion. We are not told, after all, that they never returned to their homes, nor that they did not have families. In fact, Zebedee's hired help may have done very well without James and John, and their leaving the nets may not have been a dramatic sacrifice. In any case, the call to ministry involves following and lea ving something behind.

Now, a few brief comments. Jesus called men to service - to a job - a task - a ministry, if you will. The Rev. Don Benedict writing an essay in a

entitled "Who's Killing the Church" put it very succinctly. "'Come, Follow me' was not a call to individual salvation by removal from historic reality but rather a call to participation and involvement. Jesus called men into the midst of the world to deal with men in the context of the social, political and economic forces of history. The church is thus a group of secular men and women called to be a Servant of God in history, which means within the structures of history. It is within these secular structures of life that God's struggle to make life human is found." [p. 43]

We must see that the word "salvation" has meaning in the present: that if our sense of belonging to a new kingdom has any content whatever it is in the world in which we now live: and that to be a part of that kingdom is to be in ministry where we are in the world. "Secular structures of history" is just a fancy way of saying your office, your plant, your classroom, your home, your government. It is into these "structures" that Christ calls us to ministry.

Second, Jesus took seriously the skills of the men he called. They were common fishermen: he accepted that: he didn't ask them to change that: he needed that. So the call of Christ to ministry comes to you where you are, and asks not so much that you alter what you are, as that you employ what you are, and where you are, and who you are in following him.

Your ministry, as a Christian, is to follow Christ in the context of whatever you are doing. But How? That is the crunch. It's not really too difficult to follow in terms of worship and love and service so long as we confine those activities to this ediface. But how about tomorrow - in the thick of things? In an address to a group of Christian Businessmen and Engineers, Truman Douglass spoke to the point. "I think it must be maddening to responsible laymen, when ministers tell them that the complex problems of our society can be solved by narrowly religious methods, by a little more prayer, a little more Bible reading, a little more application of the teachings of Christ.....I am in favor of all of these activities. But the Bible and the teaching of Christ have very little

to tell us specifically about how to improve agricultural productivity in a technically retarded area, or how to attack endemic disease in a nation without a public health programme." [God's Frozen People, p 63]

To Mr. Douglass's list we could add indefinitely. How to follow Christ as a production worker? Or, as was asked in a meeting in this church recently, how to be a loving Christian and fire an employee? How to weigh company profits against product dependability, or environmental pollution? How to be honest in a world that pays little attention to quiet dishonesty? How to be just and fair in the complex maze of black identity and white backlash? Or just how to be responsible and loving when your son or daughter needs help?

These are the situations in which Christ calls his people to be in ministry. And I would take a lead from an Angelican who laid all the cards on the table by saying that he - a clergyman - didn't know how to do it. "It is the parson who is the layman, and he must acknowledge this explicitly before he can gain the confidence of the laity and persuade them that he knows what he means when he talks about the calling of lay people. It is for the clergy to challenge the laity: it is for the laity to find out for themselves how they can meet the challenge." [Ibid. p 63, John Lawrence]

Now, I'm off the hook, and you're on, and that is how it should be if we take the concept of the whole people of God in ministry seriously. But I'd like to be back on the hook with you, for together we are the church - we are all the laity - we are all the priesthood. The difference between us is simply a matter of expertise in different areas. In this context, then, I would share with you something I feel very deeply.

Simon, Andrew, James, John laid down their nets and followed him. In a sense we wall leave something when we decide who and what we shall be in life. In that same sense, none of us - or very few of us - can leave our nets that absolutely, for to do so would be both chaos and selfish irresponsibliity. Nevertheless, I believe the call of Jesus Christ to ministry in the world is

always a call from something: something must be left behind. I am coming to believe that this is the only way we can really understand what it means to be committed to him, to be a disciple.

I believe he calls us today to leave our prejudices behind. We all have them: they have been poured into us by centuries of racism. They are, in many instances precious to us. Christ calls us from them. I believe he call us to question our deepest convictions, and by that I mean the political, economic and social shibboleths by which we live and move and have our being.

This is what I believe it means to accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior and to follow him into your ministry. Not so much a warm feeling in your heart; certainly not a smug self-righteousness that feeds the ego. But very simply, the adoption of a new standard; a new guide for every decision we make in our daily lives. The Lordship of Christ is authenticated, not when we verbally affirm it, but when ask only - "What would he want me to do in this situation."

And, you know, I have the lingering suspicion that once we turn that corner, and honestly ask that question, we will know his will, and therefore our ministry. I do not mean that it will be easy; nor that life is simply a composite of clear choices between right and wrong. That is not accurate. Choices are usually between mixtures of right and wrong: decisions are many times on the basis of the lesser of two evils. I do mean that - even in these situations - we may know how to follow once we've decided to do it.

It all began, of course, when he confronted four men and said "follow me". They made, in that instant, a decision. So, I believe, it is with us. It is not a once and for all decision made some time in the past. It is a confrontation with Jesus Christ every day of our lives. It is the call to follow him today - this day. It is the necessity of deciding daily to be his disciple.

May God bless us, together, in our common ministry.

Amen.